



Sola Scriptura!

by DAVID GUNN

The Struggle for Biblical Authority Rages On

It isn't much of an overstatement to say that Scriptural authority was the foundational issue for the Protestant Reformers.

According to medieval Catholicism, there were two parallel sources of ultimate truth: Holy Scripture and church tradition. Moreover, the relationship between these two authorities was such that one had to understand church tradition first to rightly interpret the Scriptures. In this way, God's Word was effectively subordinated to the traditions and dictates of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformers roundly rejected this view. For them, Scripture was supreme. No one could overrule it. No council could claim supremacy over it. No scheme of man could ever unseat it from its privileged position. Luther's comments are typical of the Reformed emphasis on Scriptural authority: "The authority of Scripture is greater than the comprehension of the whole of man's reason." And again, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it."

Biblical Defection through History

The Reformers made their case well, and a new movement

was born. Unlike the tradition-encrusted institutional church of the Middle Ages, this movement prized the straightforward reading of God's Word above all else.

Flash forward several centuries. It is now the 1800s, and Protestantism has begun imbibing the poison of liberal theology. As men like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl rise to prominence in German theological circles, Protestant devotion to the authority of Scripture wanes. Whereas the Reformation sprang forth from the Renaissance, this new movement draws intellectual vigor from the Enlightenment. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli embraced the church fathers' high view of Scripture, but Schleiermacher and Ritschl prefer to trace their intellectual heritage to the man-centered philosophizing of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. Protestant liberalism is born. Among its distinctive characteristics is a wholesale rejection of Scriptural authority. As higher criticism sweeps across the finest seminaries in Europe, Biblical scholars and theologians abandon the traditional Christian conceptions of Scripture and God in droves.

It was very shortly thereafter that liberalism crossed the Atlantic and began to take root in America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, American Christianity found itself in the grip of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. Mainline denominations vigorously embraced the new theology, and the

traditionalists pushed back with all their might. These traditionalists came to be known as fundamentalists, because their movement was characterized by five fundamentals (the inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the substitutionary atonement, and the physical resurrection and bodily return of Jesus). Among the early fundamentalist groups that emerged during this period were the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Conservative Baptists, and the Regular Baptists. While these groups did not see eye to eye on every issue, they were united in their rejection of liberal theology and their commitment to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture.

Within a few decades, neoevangelicalism began to emerge. It shared most of fundamentalism's theological commitments, but it disagreed with the fundamentalists on separatism. These evangelicals tended to prefer a strategy of infiltration to one of separation—what better way could there be to redeem a culture than to infiltrate it and then change it from the inside? Fundamentalists warned that this strategy would likely lead to a slippery slope: to gain and retain respectability with the broader scholarly community, evangelical commitment to Biblical inerrancy and authority would surely erode sooner or later.

The fundamentalists were right. By the 1970s, many evangelical divinity schools and seminaries had begun to drift toward a looser understanding of Biblical authority. Alarmed conservatives within the evangelical camp reacted to this swiftly. Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* (1976) was a clarion warning call. It alerted the evangelical world to the doctrinal defection that was slowly but surely taking place in its midst.

To the evangelicals' credit, it must be admitted that the conservative reaction was swift, sober, and satisfactory. In 1978, over 200 evangelical scholars and ministers assembled in Chicago, where they formulated the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. This document was a well-reasoned and well-articulated defense of Scriptural authority and inerrancy. To this day, it remains one of the best and clearest statements of high bibliology.

The crisis, it seemed, had been averted. Evangelicalism was once again on solid footing. The defection from Biblical authority had been halted once and for all.

Or had it?

Biblical Defection Today

Although the *Chicago Statement* proved to be widely influential, it did not turn out to be the panacea that some had hoped. In the years since its formulation, evangelical defections from Biblical inerrancy have only increased. They've grown more sophisticated too. Rather than rejecting inerrancy outright, the popular strategy these days seems to be dehistoricizing the Bible on the basis of complicated genre-based arguments. "The Bible is inerrant and authoritative and trustworthy," this approach says, "but only insofar as it is properly interpreted. And in many cases (usually pertaining to matters of historical or scientific inquiry), the Bible isn't supposed to be understood in a straightforward manner." It's an approach that Robert Thomas liked to call "genre override," because scholars using this strategy argue

that the use of certain genres should override the normal literal-grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture.

Robert Gundry deployed this strategy in his 1982 commentary on Matthew's Gospel, in which he categorized many of the Gospel's accounts as Midrash Haggadah, a rabbinic genre that isn't meant to be taken as literal history. In this way, Gundry argued that many of the accounts in Matthew (including the annunciation to Joseph, the visit of the Magi, Herod's slaughter in Bethlehem, and the flight into Egypt) never took place. They were only theological embellishments inserted into the gospel account by Matthew.

Commendably, the Evangelical Theological Society censured Gundry for what it perceived to be a rejection of Biblical inerrancy. Nevertheless, this same approach has been embraced by many other evangelical theologians and Biblical scholars. Here are just a few examples:

In his book *Can We Still Believe the Bible?*, Craig Blomberg dehistoricizes numerous Biblical accounts (including Genesis 1–11, Job, Jonah, and several of the Gospels' miracle accounts) by appealing to genre: "Simply because a work appears in narrative form does not automatically make it historical or biographical in genre," he writes. "History and biography themselves appear in many different forms, and fiction can appear identical to history in form."

Peter Enns had written several books attacking the traditional understanding of inerrancy and arguing for the dehistoricizing



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of numerous Biblical accounts. Enns explains,

I wrote *Inspiration and Incarnation* firmly and self-consciously in support of a “progressive inerrantist” or “genre inerrantist” point of view. Those who subscribe to this view affirm inerrancy in different ways, but they all agree that inerrancy is not to be equated with literalistic readings of Scripture. Rather it must be sensitive to ancient genres and ancient conventions of speech. . . . Thus, things like historical inaccuracies, myth, and theological diversity in Scripture are not errors needing to be explained away or minimized but, paradoxically, embraced as divine wisdom.

Classifying the Gospels as *Bioi* (Greco-Roman biography), apologist Michael Licona writes, “*Bioi* offered the ancient biographer great flexibility for rearranging material and inventing speeches . . . and they often included legend. Because *bios* was a flexible genre, it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins.” Using this logic, Licona dehistoricizes the resurrection of the Old Testament saints (Matt. 27), the mob falling backward at Jesus’ use of the divine name (John 18), and the appearance of the angels at the empty tomb (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24).

Philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig agrees with Licona on the resurrection of the Old Testament saints. “I don’t know what to think about this passage,” Craig says. “My reservation is that it could be part of the apocalyptic imagery of Matthew, which isn’t meant to be taken in a literal way. This would

be part of the typical sort of apocalyptic symbolism to show the earth-shattering nature of the resurrection, and it needn’t be taken historically literally.” Elsewhere, Craig has said that although he accepts Biblical inerrancy, he doesn’t think it is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. “Inerrancy is a doctrine that doesn’t belong at the center of your web of beliefs,” he says. “It belongs somewhere out near the periphery.”

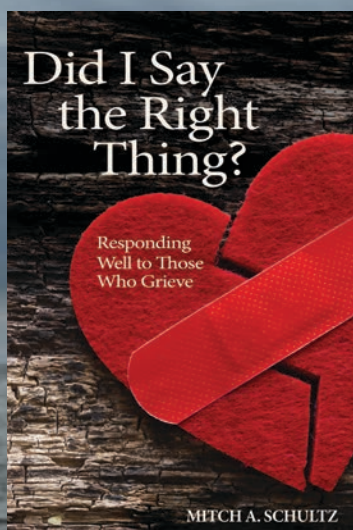
Additional examples could be multiplied, given unlimited space and time. But these suffice to show how the strategy of genre-based dehistoricizing works and to demonstrate that it is becoming widespread among influential sectors of evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Much has transpired since those days five centuries ago when *sola Scriptura* became the rallying cry of the Reformation. A great deal of ink has been spilled—and some blood too—in the long and hard-fought battle over Scriptural authority. Yet the issue has not been fully resolved. The struggle rages on. It is incumbent, in these times, for all who cherish the Scriptures and view them as the all-sufficient repository of divine truth to join in the battle with all the strength they can muster, declaring with the apostle Paul, “Let God be true but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). **B**

David Gunn is managing editor of the Baptist Bulletin.

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